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UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST

Report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Origin and background of the Working Group

1. The Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established by the General Assembly under resolution 2656 (XXV) of 7 December 1970 to study all aspects of the financing of the Agency. In that resolution, the Assembly requested the Working Group to assist the Secretary-General and the Commissioner-General of UNRWA in reaching solutions to the problems posed by the Agency's financial crisis.

2. At the twenty-fifth session and all those that followed, the General Assembly considered the reports submitted to it by the Working Group 1/ and adopted resolutions commending the efforts of the Working Group and requesting it to continue them for a further year. 2/

3. The Working Group consists of the representatives of France, Ghana, Japan, Lebanon, Norway, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America. The Chairman of the Working Group is Mr. Huseyin Çelem of Turkey.

B. Consideration of the report of the Working Group at the fiftieth session of the General Assembly

4. The report of the Working Group on its activities in 1995 (A/50/491) was considered by the General Assembly at its fiftieth session under agenda item 84, entitled "United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East". At the 3rd plenary meeting on 22 September 1995 the Assembly decided to include the item in its agenda and to allocate it to the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee), which considered it at its 12th, 13th and 25th meetings, on 30 and 31 October and on 30 November 1995.

5. At the 25th meeting of the Committee, on 30 November 1995, the representative of the Netherlands introduced a draft resolution entitled "Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East" (A/C.4/50/L.12), sponsored by Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

6. Under the terms of the draft resolution, the General Assembly would:

(a) Commend the Working Group for its efforts to assist in ensuring the financial security of the Agency;

(b) Take note with approval of the report of the Working Group;

(c) Request the Working Group to continue its efforts, in cooperation with the Secretary-General and the Commissioner-General, for the financing of the Agency for a further period of one year;

(d) Request the Secretary-General to provide the necessary services and assistance to the Working Group for the conduct of its work.

7. At the same meeting, the Committee adopted the draft resolution without a vote.

8. At its 82nd plenary meeting on 6 December 1995, the General Assembly considered the draft resolution regarding the Working Group, which had been recommended by the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee), together with other draft resolutions under this item. At the same meeting, the Assembly adopted the draft resolution without a vote as resolution 50/28 B.

II. ACTIVITIES OF THE WORKING GROUP DURING 1996

9. Throughout the year, the members of the Working Group have followed with concern the difficulties experienced by the Agency and, in particular, the serious financial situation it continued to face. The Working Group held two meetings, on 13 September and 14 October 1996, to consider the recent developments in the Agency's financial situation and to prepare its report to the General Assembly. The Working Group adopted its report at its meeting on 14 October 1996.

10. At its 115th meeting, on 13 September 1996, the Working Group heard the representative of UNRWA in New York, who submitted an up-to-date report on the financial situation of the Agency. On 18 September 1996, the Working Group held an informal meeting to discuss the Agency's financial crisis. The Working Group gave further consideration to the representative's report at its 116th meeting, on 14 October 1996 (see sect. III below).

III. FINANCIAL SITUATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST

11. UNRWA ended the 1994-1995 biennium with an adjusted deficit of $14.4 million in its regular budget, resulting from expenditures of $546.6 million as against adjusted income from contributions of $532.2 million. Of that deficit, $6 million was recorded against 1994 and $8.4 million against 1995. Those shortfalls reduced the Agency's working capital by more than half, from $22.6 million at the beginning of the biennium to $8.2 million at its close. Separately from the activities financed under UNRWA's regular budget, the Agency continued in 1994-1995 to operate a fund for extraordinary measures for Lebanon and the occupied territory (EMLOT), which had been created in 1990 to provide emergency assistance to Palestine refugees in areas of special crisis. Total EMLOT expenditure in 1994-1995 amounted to $28.4 million against receipts of $20.8 million, leaving a deficit of $7.6 million which had to be funded out of working capital. The Agency also operated a number of

extrabudgetary accounts. The Peace Implementation Programme (PIP), introduced in October 1993 following the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Government of Israel, aimed to make the results of the peace process felt at the local level through a wide-ranging investment programme to develop infrastructure, improve living conditions and create employment opportunities in refugee communities throughout UNRWA's area of operations. As at June 1996, the Agency had received a total of $192.6 million in pledges and contributions under PIP. The establishment of PIP made redundant the Expanded Programme of Assistance (EPA), established in 1988 with the aim of improving living conditions in refugee camps and upgrading UNRWA's infrastructure in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and subsequently in the entire area of operations. EPA would be phased out upon completion of projects funded in previous years. Special project accounts existed for the European Gaza Hospital project, initiated in 1990, and the relocation of UNRWA's Vienna headquarters to the area of operations, the latter account having been established in accordance with the wish of the Agency's donors that the move not be financed out of the regular budget. As at June 1996, the Agency had received pledges and contributions of $41.2 million towards the hospital project and $9.6 million towards the headquarters move.

12. The 1995 shortfall in the regular budget, UNRWA's third consecutive annual deficit, came despite strenuous efforts on the Agency's part to bring income and expenditure into line. The $14.2 million in austerity measures imposed in 1993 remained in place throughout the 1994-1995 biennium and were carried over into 1996. In June 1995, the Agency estimated a year-end deficit of $16 million, which would have depleted its working capital entirely. To avert that outcome, $12 million in salary increases were deferred from 1995 to 1996, artificially and temporarily reducing the estimated deficit to $4 million. However, the delayed payment of some pledges, and requirements for the financing of certain non-regular but essential items from the General Fund in late 1995, increased the actual 1995 deficit to $8.4 million. Contributions from donors continued to lag behind growth in funding needs arising from the increase in the number of UNRWA's beneficiaries and unavoidable cost increases owing to inflation. In May 1996, the Agency projected a budget deficit of $16 million for the year. In immediate response and to contain expenditures not yet made, the Agency in June 1996 implemented a further $9 million in austerity measures, including freezes in recruitment for some posts and hiring for others, and reductions in the budget allocations for hospitalization, medical supplies, maintenance, construction, vehicles, computers, and equipment and supplies. Those measures, combined with the 1993 measures still in force, were having a detrimental impact on the quality of UNRWA services to the Palestine refugee population and jeopardized the Agency's ability to maintain those services at existing levels. In August 1996, the Agency faced estimated deficit figures totalling $45.2 million, of which $9.3 million represented the core deficit, $23.2 million the cost to restore the 1993 and 1996 austerity measures, and $12.7 million the annual provision for termination indemnities payable to staff upon UNRWA's eventual dissolution, included in the regular budget with the agreement of the Agency's donors. The Agency also found itself in a precarious cash position, with available reserves barely sufficient to meet routine payments and a possibility that the Agency would run out of cash in the months ahead.

13. The Commissioner-General of UNRWA and his staff continued to draw attention to the Agency's financial situation and to seek additional and increased contributions to fund ongoing programmes. To that end, two meetings of major donor and host Governments were held at Amman during 1996, on 8 and 9 May and on 23 September. The latter was an extraordinary meeting convened by the Commissioner-General to alert the international community to UNRWA's critical financial situation and its implications for the Agency's ability to carry out its internationally mandated obligations. Delegates represented 27 of the Agency's major donors and host Governments as well as the Palestine Liberation Organization. In response to an appeal by the Commissioner-General, pledges of about $14 million were made at the meeting in support of the Agency's work in 1996, of which $11.25 million was for the general fund in 1996, with the balance being for the European Gaza Hospital.

14. In view of the seriousness of the financial crisis facing the Agency, the Working Group, in informal consultations on 18 September 1996, agreed on the text of a statement which the Chairman of the Group forwarded to the Commissioner-General in time for the extraordinary meeting. In that statement, the Group stressed the following:

(a) The deficits facing UNRWA in recent years had become structural rather than temporary in nature and therefore must be addressed in terms of their impact on the services which the Agency was mandated to provide;

(b) The situation facing UNRWA in the last quarter of 1996 was untenable because its cash reserves had been depleted, and replenishment could only be effected by immediate payment of pledges already received; further future deficits could no longer be absorbed because the Agency's working capital would have been exhausted by the end of 1996;

(c) The Agency would start the 1997 budget year having reduced its budget volume through accumulated austerity measures and other reductions, depleted its financial reserves and lowered overhead costs to their practical limits, and the projected cumulative gap between expenditure and income would inevitably lead to ruptures in services;

(d) Because the Commissioner-General may not incur commitments beyond the level of the financial resources made available through contributions and confirmed pledges, the Agency's ability to continue to deliver its services in the remainder of the 1996-1997 budget biennium and beyond was absolutely limited to the level of funding provided, and expenditures therefore must be kept within the limits of funds actually made available.

15. The Working Group strongly urged those present at the extraordinary meeting to take serious and concrete steps to provide the financial resources required by the Agency to carry out its essential programmes and avoid creating an even more serious crisis with potentially dangerous and far-reaching consequences for the Palestine refugees and the entire Middle East region.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

16. The Working Group views with profound concern the financial crisis facing UNRWA towards the end of 1996. The Group is particularly alarmed at the depletion of the Agency's working capital and the emergence of a condition of structural deficit which can no longer be remedied through the application of austerity measures and is therefore not sustainable over the longer term. That situation has serious implications for the Agency and the Palestine refugees, including the possibility of direct cuts and reductions in services. The Working Group feels that the General Assembly must be more actively engaged than in previous years in ensuring that UNRWA is given the resources it needs to fulfil the mandate which the international community has given it, particularly in view of the natural growth in the refugee population, the worsening socio-economic conditions in the Agency's area of operations and the potentially destabilizing effect on an already volatile political situation of any significant reduction in the Agency's activities.

17. The Working Group commends the Commissioner-General and his staff for their efforts at fund-raising, particularly for the organization of the 23 September 1996 extraordinary meeting, at which pledges were secured to ensure the Agency's uninterrupted operation through the end of 1996. The Working Group expresses appreciation to donors, especially those who provided emergency funding for the Agency in the current crisis, increased their contributions or expressed an interest in contributing for the first time. The Working Group joins the Commissioner-General in expressing the hope that the example set by those donors will be followed by others. The Working Group applauds the steps already taken by the Commissioner-General to improve UNRWA's internal management and reaffirms the need to continue efforts at increasing clarity, particularly concerning the cost-effectiveness of current operations, the prioritization and budgeting of UNRWA activities, and contingency planning for adjusting activities if sufficient funding to maintain the current quality and level of services cannot be secured. Greater clarity is also desirable regarding the harmonization of UNRWA's activities with those of the Palestinian Authority and host Governments. In the meantime, the Working Group believes that UNRWA should be circumspect about taking on additional capital commitments which strain its existing resources and which will lead to recurrent cost implications.

18. The Working Group shares the Commissioner-General's concern that the activities forming the core of UNRWA's services to Palestine refugees, namely education, health care, and relief and social services, are increasingly threatened as a result of the Agency's chronic budget deficits. It is a source of great concern that the Agency has been unable to raise the funds needed to restore services cut as a result of the austerity measures introduced in 1993 and still in force, and has been required to implement new measures in 1996. As the Commissioner-General has pointed out, while every effort was being made to streamline and rationalize the Agency's operations to avoid reductions in services to refugees, cost-saving measures can only be taken so far. If funding shortfalls continue, the Agency will have no choice but to effect substantive reductions in programme activities. In the coming years, UNRWA will have to identify and attract the resources it requires to serve a refugee population whose needs are growing by 5 per cent per year through a combination of natural growth, inflation and new registrations. Continuation of the present situation

of chronic structural deficits could force the Agency to make direct cuts and reductions in core programme areas, the ramifications of which would be highly political and potentially destabilizing. In the light of UNRWA's unique role in the region, a reduction in services would be immediately interpreted as reflecting a decreased commitment by the international community to the resolution of the Palestine refugee problem.

19. The Working Group therefore strongly urges all Governments to bear in mind the foregoing considerations when deciding upon the level of their contributions to UNRWA for 1997, and:

(a) Urges those Governments that have not yet contributed to UNRWA to start to do so;

(b) Urges those Governments that have so far made only relatively small contributions to increase their contributions;

(c) Urges those Governments that in the past have made generous contributions to UNRWA to continue to do so and to strive to increase them;

(d) Urges those Governments that traditionally have shown special interest in the welfare of the Palestine refugees, particularly those of the wealthier States in the region, to consider contributing or increasing their contributions;

(e) Urges Governments to consider making additional contributions to finance deficit amounts so that UNRWA services can continue uninterrupted and, if possible, to enable the Agency to restore services cut as a result of the austerity measures, and to ensure that donor support of emergency-related and special programmes, the Peace Implementation Programme, the European Gaza Hospital project and the costs of the relocation of the Agency's Vienna headquarters to the area of operations will not in any way decrease or divert contributions to the Agency's regular programmes.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Twenty-fifth Session, Annexes, agenda item 35, document A/8264; ibid., Twenty-sixth Session, Annexes, agenda item 38, document A/8476; ibid., Twenty-seventh Session, Annexes, agenda item 40, document A/8849; ibid., Twenty-eighth Session, Annexes, agenda item 43, document A/9231; ibid., Twenty-ninth Session, Annexes, agenda item 38, document A/9815; ibid., Thirtieth Session, Annexes, agenda item 54, documents A/10268 and A/10334; ibid., Thirty-first Session, Annexes, agenda item 53, document A/31/279; ibid., Thirty-second Session, Annexes, agenda item 55, document A/32/278; ibid., Thirty-third Session, Annexes, agenda item 54, document A/33/320; ibid., Thirty-fourth Session, Annexes, agenda item 50, document A/34/567; A/35/526; A/36/615; A/37/591; A/38/558; A/39/575; A/40/736; A/41/702; A/42/633; A/43/702; A/44/641; A/45/645; A/46/622; A/47/576; A/48/554; and A/49/509.

2/ Resolutions 2791 (XXVI) of 6 December 1971, 2964 (XXVII) of 13 December 1972, 3090 (XXVIII) of 7 December 1973, 3330 (XXIX) of 17 December 1974, 3419 (XXX) of 8 December 1975, 31/15 C of 23 November 1976, 32/90 D of 13 December 1977, 33/112 D of 18 December 1978, 34/52 D of 23 November 1979, 35/13 D of 3 November 1980, 36/146 E of 16 December 1981, 37/120 A of 16 December 1982, 38/83 B of 15 December 1983, 39/99 B of 14 December 1984, 40/165 B of 16 December 1985, 41/69 B of 3 December 1986, 42/69 B of 2 December 1987, 43/57 B of 6 December 1988, 44/47 B of 8 December 1989, 45/73 B of 11 December 1990, 46/46 B of 9 December 1991, 47/69 B of 14 December 1992, 48/40 B of 10 December 1993 and 49/35 B of 9 December 1994.

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ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa: implementation of resolution 50/112

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. By its resolution 47/188 of 22 December 1992, the General Assembly established an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa.

2. The General Assembly decided, by its resolution 49/234 of 23 December 1996, that the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee should continue to function in order (a) to prepare for the first session of the Conference of the Parties; (b) to facilitate implementation of the provisions of the Committee's resolution 5/1 on urgent action for Africa; (c) to initiate measures relating to the identification of the organization to house the global mechanism; (d) to elaborate the rules of procedure of the Conference of the Parties; and (e) to consider other relevant issues.

3. In resolution 50/112 of 20 December 1995, the General Assembly decided that the Committee should continue to prepare for the first session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention. The Assembly requested the Secretary General to report to it, at its fifty-first session, on the implementation of the resolution.

4. The present report reviews recent developments and measures taken in implementation of resolution 50/112. It supplements the information already provided to the General Assembly at its fiftieth session in the reports of the Secretary-General (A/50/515 and A/50/516).

II. STATUS OF THE CONVENTION

5. As at 3 October 1996, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, which was adopted on 17 June 1994, had been signed by 115 States and ratified, accepted, approved or acceded to by 50 countries: Mexico, Cape Verde, Netherlands, Egypt, Senegal, Ecuador, Lesotho, Finland, Togo, Tunisia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Peru, Sudan, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Niger, Mauritius, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Spain, Federated States of Micronesia, Israel, Portugal, Panama, Lebanon, Algeria, Gambia, Malawi, Germany, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Oman, Bolivia, Mauritania, Eritrea, Benin, Norway, Mongolia, Central African Republic, Gabon, Botswana, Turkmenistan, Zambia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Haiti and Chad. The fiftieth such instrument was deposited 27 September 1996 and, pursuant to article 36, paragraph 1, of the Convention, the Convention will enter into force on 26 December 1996.

6. The first session of the Conference of the Parties will take place not later than one year after the entry into force of the Convention, namely by 25 December 1997. Members of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee decided at the ninth session to accept the offers of the Government of Italy to hold the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties and of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to provide services and facilities for the meeting, and decided to hold the first meeting of the Conference in Rome, at a time to be determined at a later date.

7. At the eighth and ninth sessions of the Committee, in February 1996 and September 1996, respectively, many other members indicated that they had initiated the internal process for ratification, acceptance, approval or accession and expected that it would be completed in the coming months.

III. IMPLEMENTATION OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS

A. The eighth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

8. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 49/234, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee adopted, at its sixth session, held in New York in January 1995, a resolution on the organization and programme of work for the interim period leading to the first session of the Conference of the Parties. The two working groups established to carry out the preparatory work continued to function at the eighth session.

9. Working Group I is responsible for (a) the initiation of measures relating to the identification of an organization to house the Global Mechanism to

promote actions leading to the mobilization and channelling of substantial financial resources, including its operational modalities; (b) recommendations on the designation by the Conference of the Parties of a Permanent Secretariat and arrangements for its functioning; (c) financial rules; and (d) programme and budget.

10. Working Group II is responsible for (a) the organization of scientific and technological cooperation, in particular the terms of reference of the Committee on Science and Technology, the establishment and maintenance of a roster of independent experts and the terms of reference and modalities of work of any ad hoc panels that the Conference of the Parties may decide to appoint; (b) the rules of procedure of the Conference of the Parties; (c) procedures on questions of implementation; (d) procedures for conciliation and arbitration; and (e) procedures for communication of information for the review of implementation of the Convention and its institutional arrangements.

11. The Committee decided that the following questions would be examined in plenary: the facilitation of the implementation of the resolution on urgent action for Africa through the exchange of information and the review of progress made thereon and the promotion of action in other regions and the agenda for the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties. The Committee requested the interim secretariat to prepare a draft programme and budget for the first financial period following the first Conference of the Parties, for consideration at the last session of the Committee prior to the first session of the Conference.

12. The Committee also reviewed reports on measures taken to implement the resolution on urgent action for Africa and interim action in other regions.

B. The ninth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

13. At its ninth session, held in New York from 3 to 13 September 1996, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee reviewed updated reports on measures taken to implement the resolution on urgent action for Africa and interim action in other regions. The discussion demonstrated that all signatories were taking active steps to promote interim action as briefly described in paragraph 25 below. Many delegations expressed their satisfaction with the efforts of the interim secretariat to facilitate urgent action for Africa and interim action in other regions. Members of the Committee and international organizations were encouraged to provide supplementary information at future sessions of the Committee.

14. Members of the Committee had before them offers from the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) to provide overall administrative support and/or support services to the permanent secretariat and decided to consider the matter further at the tenth session. In addition, members heard offers from the Governments of Canada, Germany and Spain to host the permanent

secretariat in Montreal, Bonn and Murcia, respectively, and will also consider the matter further at the tenth session.

15. In addition to discussions in plenary, the two working groups continued an examination of the questions relating to the preparation for the first session of the Conference of the Parties. The atmosphere was constructive throughout the discussions and progress was made on all issues under review. Recommendations were made by the Committee for submission to the first session of the Conference of the Parties relating to the terms of reference of the Committee on Science and Technology, the establishment and maintenance of a roster of experts and appointment of ad hoc panels. A recommendation was also made for submission to the first Conference of the Parties on procedures for communication of information and review of implementation. The working groups will continue their work at the tenth session on the basis of documentation reflecting the outcome of discussions, as well as analysis and suggestions, to be prepared by the interim secretariat.

C. Participation in the work of the Committee

16. Participation by States in the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee process remains high. A large majority of delegations included representatives from capitals. The participation of developing countries was facilitated by the contributions of Governments to the special voluntary fund set up for that purpose by the General Assembly in its resolution 47/188, paragraph 15. However, since their participation remains dependent on the availability of financial resources, there is a concern that, should replenishment of the voluntary fund be insufficient, many countries affected by desertification might not be adequately represented at future sessions of the Committee.

17. Participation in the Committee by institutions of the United Nations system, other international organizations and non-governmental organizations remained active and constructive. FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UNDP, UNEP and WMO, in particular, continued to support the process actively by making financial or human resources available to the secretariat and/or by providing expertise and resources, both human and financial, in support of preparatory activities carried cut in a number of affected developing countries.

18. At its ninth session, the Committee accredited 31 non-governmental organizations, bringing the total of such organizations accredited to it to 363. Representatives of 50 non-governmental organizations participated in the ninth session. At the close of the plenary session, on 6 September, the non-governmental organization representatives presented a panel discussion on women and desertification highlighting some of the gender aspects covered in the Convention, in particular the constraints faced by women because of land tenure systems and limited access to credit. The panel discussion was informative and enriching. Overall the contribution from the non-governmental community was relevant and useful to the work of the Committee; however, it must be noted that the degree of participation from the non-governmental community is highly dependent on the availability of financial assistance.

IV. ARRANGEMENTS TO ENSURE THE SUCCESS OF THE OBSERVANCE BY THE UNITED NATIONS OF WORLD DAY TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT

A. Introduction

19. By its resolution 49/115, the General Assembly proclaimed 17 June World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, to be observed beginning in 1995.

20. The resolution invited States to devote the World Day to promoting public awareness on international cooperation to combat desertification and the effects of drought and on the implementation of the Convention to Combat Desertification.

21. The resolution also invited the Secretary-General to make recommendations on ways and means by which the Secretariat could assist Member States, at their request, in organizing their national activities for the observance of the World Day, and to make the necessary arrangements to ensure the success of the observance of the World Day. His recommendations are contained in his report of 6 October 1995 (A/50/516).

22. On the occasion of World Day on 17 June 1996, the interim secretariat undertook, or supported, a variety of significant activities in Geneva, Mexico, New York and Nairobi. These activities were undertaken with the cooperation of specialized agencies, United Nations programmes and relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. The aim was to promote and raise public awareness of the problem of desertification and to promote the implementation of the Convention.

23. The interim secretariat's main activities on World Day 1996 were as follows:

(a) Screening in Geneva of the film "Po di Sangui", made in Guinea-Bissau. Apart from its strong links to the issue of desertification, the film's cinematographic and artistic qualities made it a major success at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival;

(b) Participation with the Department of Public Information in producing a special CNN documentary on desertification in its series "UN in Action". It was aired on CNN World Report on the occasion of the World Day;

(c) Launching of the first issue of a Newsletter in English (Down to Earth) and in French (Cap sur Terre). This will be continued on a regular basis and directly complements the secretariat's information kit and simplified guide;

(d) Distribution of T-shirts printed in English, French and Spanish;

(e) Contact with and encouragement of journalists to cover the issue prior to, during and after 17 June. Various news agencies produced stories on desertification for the World Day and the Day itself was well covered.

24. Furthermore, many activities of a similar nature were organized by subregional organizations, Governments and non-governmental organizations at the subregional and national levels.

V. ACTIVITIES IN SUPPORT OF THE RESOLUTION ON URGENT MEASURES FOR AFRICA AND INTERIM ACTION IN OTHER REGIONS

25. Reports and discussions at the eighth and ninth sessions of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee demonstrated that all signatories to the Convention are taking active steps to promote action during the interim period, with the support of competent international organizations. Members of the Committee are particularly committed to implementing the resolution on urgent action for Africa and are taking measures accordingly. The discussions also demonstrated that concrete action is being taken in other regions, underlining the global dimension of desertification and the readiness of countries to initiate response measures.

VI. FUTURE WORK

A. Tenth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

26. The Committee decided in decision 9/5 that the tenth session should aim at finalizing all outstanding negotiating issues and that the negotiations of the two working groups should be concluded at that session. In the same decision, they authorized the Chairman of the Committee to organize such consultations in the period after the tenth session of the Committee as he deems necessary for the appropriate preparation of the first Conference of the Parties.

B. Maintenance of the interim arrangements to 31 December 1998

27. In its decision 9/4, the Committee recommended that the General Assembly maintain the arrangements within the current programme budget for the interim secretariat to support the Convention until 31 December 1998 and to maintain extrabudgetary funds.

C. Calendar for 1997-1998

28. In its resolution 50/112, the General Assembly decided to convene, as necessary, a further session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee in 1997 following its tenth session, the exact dates and venue to be determined at a later stage. In its decision 9/4, the Committee recommended to the Assembly that it include in the calendar of conferences and meetings for 1997-1998 the sessions of the Conference of the Parties and of any subsidiary bodies that the Conference may need to convene.